

THE VICARS' CLOSE, AT WELLS.



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THE annexed engraving is a restored representation of the exterior of the hall and staircase, and two of the dwelling-houses, at the southern end of the vicars' college or close, at Wells, in Somersetshire. This establishment originated in the year 1237, with Bishop Joceline de Welles, who first ordained the chantry priests attached to the choir of the cathedral, under the title of vicars choral. Bishop Ralph de Salopia, or Shrewsbury, in 1347, considerably enlarged the original establishment, and added several buildings, parts of which, including the two two light windows, shewn in the engraving, over the entrance gateway, are still visible. Subsequent benefactions were bestowed and additions made, the principal of which were the erection by Bishop Beckington about the year 1450, of the Close-hall-gate or chain gate, which crosses the public road, over which is a corridor or gallery communicating with the vicars' common hall, and terminating at the opposite end in a staircase which descends into the north transept of the cathedral. The buildings are thereby attached to the church, and the archi-

tectural features of this ingenious arrangement are alike exceedingly interesting and beautiful.

Beckington's three executors, Richard Swan, Hugh Sugar (illustrations of whose chantry in Wells Cathedral are given in Vol. IV. of *THE BUILDER*, p. 102. and 114), and John Pope, *alias* Talbot, fulfilled the directions left behind him of applying the residue of his property "to pious uses," by entirely rebuilding, as is supposed, the vicars' dwellings. At the Reformation this establishment, though considerably reduced, escaped the fate of other religious foundations; and in the twenty-fourth of Elizabeth a charter was granted, constituting it a corporate and politic body, entitled, the Principals, Seniors, and Vicars Choral of the Choir of the Cathedral Church of St. Andrew at Wells, with the privilege of a common seal; restricting, however, their number to not less than fourteen, nor more than twenty. The vicars' dwellings, forty-two in number, are on the north side of the cathedral, and form two sides of a court, the north end of which is occupied by a chapel, with a library over, and at the south extremity communicating, as above stated, with the cathedral. They are most interesting examples of English domestic architecture of the

fifteenth century. The houses have gardens in front, divided by low walls; and each garden has a porch at the entrance. On every chimney-shaft the several rebuses of Beckington's executors are successively introduced within a panel, under the arms of the see and those of Beckington, alternately.

The oriel shewn in the engraving, and one corresponding with it on the opposite side of the hall, are of later date than the other portions.

It is to be wished that the desire of rescuing from oblivion the traces of our forefathers' pious zeal and architectural skill, which happily characterizes the present time, and of which the signs are, we may hope, becoming increasingly evident, may manifest itself in the case of these unique and interesting buildings. Modern vandalism, it is deeply to be regretted, has well nigh obliterated their original features, and the little that remains to tell of the past is rapidly hastening to irrecoverable decay. May it not be too late, however, to hope that amid the interest now so much manifested in the preservation of the architectural mementos of the mediæval period, the vicars' college at Wells will not be forgotten.

F. T. D.